

Is the US Funding an Experiment in Digital Control in Ukraine?

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Fighting between Russia and Ukraine has been going on for a little over a year now, ending the lives of hundreds of thousands of young men and displacing millions. Ukraine's Defense Minister, Oleksii Reznikov, [invited Western arms manufacturers](#) to test their newest weapons against Russians in 2022. And indeed, all kinds of weaponry have been flowing into Ukraine. It is truly a testing ground.

So, this begs the question, is anything else getting tested there? The Ukrainian government seems pretty willing to use its own citizens as guinea pigs, and the American government seems pretty willing to foot the bill. Are American tax dollars going to any other interesting projects?

Here's what the US is funding in Ukraine.

Yes, actually. Volodymyr Zelensky became president of Ukraine in May 2019, and almost immediately he introduced his idea of a "[country in a smartphone](#)."

In early September 2019, [Ukraine launched](#) its Ministry of Digital Transformation, headed by a World Economic Forum participant, Mykhailo Fedorov. According to Fedorov, the goal of this new government department was to streamline government services, making it easier to apply for driver's licenses, passports, and so on. Ukraine has long held the reputation as Europe's most corrupt country, and young politicians like Fedorov want to take advantage of new technology to make changes.

So, in early February 2020, the Ukrainian government launched its Diia app for smartphones. Developed by volunteers from EPAM Systems, Diia has been touted as a way to streamline government services. By 2021 it had allowed Ukraine to become the first European nation to accord digital passports and one of the first to issue digital drivers' licenses. Fedorov reported in 2021 that about one-fourth of the Ukrainian population was using it, and it was gaining in popularity. As of January 2023, about [half the adult Ukrainian](#)

[population](#) was using it.

There is a positive side to streamlining government services. Diia has allowed Ukrainians to easily start new businesses, making all the required government paperwork easily available. I can see this being helpful for young entrepreneurs.

However, negative consequences became readily apparent, too.

Within a year of its launch, millions of Ukrainians found that their personal data, such as driver's licenses, social media information, and banking information, [were being traded online](#). There's always been the risk of losing your wallet and your driver's license, but with everything online, the risks of fraud and identity theft increase astronomically.

Early on in his presidency, Zelensky talked about streamlining the voting process via the app. Aside from the fact that experts [have never agreed about the safety of online voting](#), by July 2022, [Zelensky had](#) banned political opposition parties and shut down media companies with alternative views. Having one central app that controls everyone's important documents makes it far easier for any ruling party to maintain its power.

Controlling elections is only the beginning. Diia launched in February 2020, and by March 2020, Diia was helping the Ukrainian government enforce its lockdown policies, as discussed in the recent report by Redacted.

The Redacted report shows portions of various WEF summits and at 2:06 has a clip of a WEF paper saying, "This digital identity determines what products, services, and information we can access—or conversely, what is closed off to us." Diia (and other digital identity products) have been marketed as a convenience, but don't be fooled. Developers of this technology have seen their potential as a control mechanism from the beginning.

The Redacted report also shows clips of Federov speaking at the 2021 WEF summit, and at 5:40 he openly admits that the pandemic allowed the Ukrainian government to speed up Ukraine's digital transformation. "The pandemic has accelerated our progress," says Federov. "People are really now demanding digital online services. People have no choice but to trust technology."

The Redacted report traces Diia's transformation from a convenient service to a military tool. At 6:39, they discuss an interview in Wired with Anton Melnyk, an adviser in Ukraine's Ministry for Digital Transformation. In March 2022, Dr. Melnyk stated, "We have restructured the Ministry of Digital Transformation into a clear military organization."

Wartime features in an app

Shortly after the Russian invasion, Diia added all kinds of new wartime features. Ukrainians can report Russian troop movements through Diia's chatbot, eVorog (eEnemy). Ukrainians can receive government payments even if they're displaced. But Diia doesn't stop there.

Diia encourages citizens to snitch on their neighbors. The wartime features allow any citizen to anonymously accuse any other citizen of being a Russian collaborator. Stalin's rule in the Soviet Union demonstrated how wrong this can go. Ukrainians hate Stalin, and rightfully so. But using cutting-edge technology to encourage the exact same kind of

community-destroying snitching is a page right out of his playbook. Between the snitching and its one official, government-approved news station, Diia is rapidly becoming Stalin in a smartphone.

Here's why Americans should care.

In case you're wondering why we should care about the ins and outs of Ukrainian bureaucracy, there are two big reasons worth paying attention to this. The first is that Americans have been paying for much of the technical development. The second is that the "government in a smartphone" concept is rapidly spreading around the world.

USAID has been [supporting Ukraine's digital transformation](#) since 2016. The volunteers that developed Diia were Ukrainians working with EPAM Systems, a software engineering company based in Pennsylvania. And EPAM Systems may be a private company, but USAID isn't. It's [taxpayer-funded](#).

After the Russian invasion, [USAID donated another \\$8.5 million](#) to Ukraine to help develop Diia's wartime features. USAID director Samantha Power spoke at the World Economic Forum in 2023, touting Diia's success. She and Federov both talked about the huge successes and discussed sharing Diia's model with other countries. Incidentally, Samantha Power [is married](#) to Cass Sunstein, the author of [Nudge](#) and a [number of other books](#) that some might consider pro-social-manipulation.

Power has stated that USAID intends to look for leaders in developing nations that have been running on anti-corruption platforms and sharing Diia-like technology with them to help modernize their countries. She [specifically cited](#) Zambia, the Dominican Republic, and Ecuador. In January, [Estonia announced](#) that they would begin trial runs of their mRiik app, modeled after Ukraine's Diia.

And, of course, all of this sounds very loving and charitable. However, it's impossible to ignore the financial incentives.

The digital shift in America

The U.S. got a giant shove online when lockdowns were enforced in 2020 and 2021. The U.S.'s "digital transformation," even though it was only partial, still [made already-wealthy tech companies](#) even wealthier. Even though billionaire wealth can fluctuate pretty dramatically, by the end of 2022, American billionaires were [still 50% richer](#) than pre-pandemic.

Lovers of free-market economics will point out that increased technological ability is a rising wave that lifts everyone. That *can* be true, but ask yourself, are most people you know 50% richer than before the pandemic? Probably not. Our lives have been getting pushed online over the past few years. Some people profited, but the quality of life of the average citizen decreased.

Combine the shift to a digital world with the reconstruction after wartime destruction, and you see huge opportunities for profit. It's estimated that rebuilding Ukraine, so far, [will cost over \\$1 trillion](#). Zelensky and BlackRock CEO Larry Fink have already [come to an agreement](#) about managing the rebuilding of Ukraine. USAID may be charitable, but BlackRock isn't. Ukraine is in the process of being destroyed and being rebuilt. This is going to be hugely profitable for certain people, and Big Tech seems to be intent on getting

their slice of the pie.

This kind of thing isn't new. Brigadier General Smedley Butler, combat veteran and Medal of Honor recipient, wrote [War Is a Racket](#) back in the 1930s. The book is full of examples of industries generating huge wartime profits in conflicts a hundred years ago. War profiteering isn't new. It isn't a conspiracy. It's human nature.

There's no reason not to think that the same powerful Big Tech figures will not continue to push the expansion of their businesses by pushing life around the world online, with or without violent conflict.

Will we all be pushed into government-by-smartphone?

Maybe some emerging markets will be helped by Diia-like apps. But what about countries that already had reasonably safe and secure government services? Will functional governments be pushed onto a smartphone?

It's likely, though not imminent. The [Improving Digital Identity Act of 2021](#) is in Congress right now. There are a few versions of it under review. The Senate version actually states that the government [cannot require digital identity](#) for any kind of transaction.

Americans are still, on average, relatively concerned about privacy and the concentration of power. The many concerns surrounding Centralized Bank Digital Currencies apply to digital identification, as well. [The OP ran an article](#) last month discussing the total loss of anonymity that will occur when CBDCs become implemented.

And there are other, less discussed applications. Look at geofencing. A federal district judge just issued [a first-ever "geofencing" warrant](#) for anyone in the vicinity of the Capitol on January 6. This gave police the authority to search the cell phone data of every American whose coordinates happened to be in the area, regardless of whether or not they had anything to do with the shenanigans at the Capitol.

Imagine if they could pull your driver's license or freeze your bank account, too. Right now, that's not possible. With all of your important documents linked to something like Diia, it could be.

Here's how it could unfold.

I don't think we will all be forced onto something like Diia in the space of a year, but I think we're at the beginning of a certain chain of events. Digital IDs begin to be offered as a convenience, they become popular, they begin to be preferred by businesses and governments, and we eventually lose the option of physical IDs. And, of course, some kind of crisis (climate change, another pandemic, a hot war) could speed this up more quickly, as happened in Ukraine.

The tools to implement a CBDC linked to a digital identity are already out there. Look at China's social credit system. It's technically possible for us, too. It sounds crazy, but [conspiracy theorists have been proven correct](#) so consistently lately I don't think skepticism regarding these new, profitable technologies is unreasonable.

How to retain our privacy

We need to remember that life's about more than convenience. It's about the freedom to try new things, some of which will fail spectacularly and some of which will lead to resounding successes. That combination of failure and success is what leads to the deeper insights that make most of us into interesting people. If we continue to trade privacy for convenience, we may find we don't have much freedom left, either.

If we want to retain some measure of privacy and control over our own lives, if we want to avoid the techno-prison currently being constructed for us, if Americans don't want our own "Stalin in a smartphone," we need to avoid feeding the digital beast. Yes, it's hard, and no, it's not going to be realistic for 99.9% of us to live completely offline. But we can keep our friendships and purchases offline as much as possible. We can drag our feet when it comes to getting the newest smart gadgets. Perhaps most importantly, those of us with teenagers and young adults can spend time explaining our privacy concerns to the younger generation, so they try to live life offline, as well.

The digital prison is being constructed, but it's by no means done yet. Grand plans like "government in a smartphone" always fall apart at some point. The problems with Diia are obvious to anyone paying attention. If enough of us can postpone moving everything online, hopefully, this impetus will collapse on its own.

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